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Film traces 33 years of CIA's 'secret history'

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By Richard Hoops

Torture and mercenary intrigue rarely lead to positive public relations. And with three hours of film that pieces together ties to secret police, hired soldiers, and organized crime, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has reason for dismay at the theatrical release of "On Company Business," a documentary tracing 33 years of CIA "secret history."

But the CIA has not yet complained about any inaccuracies to Allan Francovich, the film's director.

"The whole point of it—and the reason the film was five years in the making—was to make sure everything in it was accurate," Francovich said in an interview Saturday. "After public showings, people who have been in the CIA or are still in the CIA come up and tell me they think the film is extraordinary because it is an accurate depiction."

"On Company Business" paints a sordid picture of the history and activities of the CIA since its inception in 1947, portraying it as a government unto itself and beyond executive or legislative authority. The film uses no narrative to make its point, relying instead on material from news archives and interviews with past and present CIA officials. Included among the latter are William Colby, director of the CIA from 1973 to 1976, and ex-agents Phillip Agee and John Stockwell.

"The film is not investigative journalism trying to cover new ground," Francovich said. "It is an attempt to show and explain basic things—some very shocking things—using the historical record."

Francovich is visiting Minneapolis to introduce "On Company Business" at showings this week at the University. The film has been released in six U.S. cities since November 1982, when a two-year option by the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) on the documentary ran out.

PBS bought the option to "On Company Business" during its last year of production, Francovich said, but the controversy the film caused when it was aired on television in 1980 kept it

in the can until last year.

"It was aired once and created such a storm, such a reaction on the part of the CIA, that they pressured the PBS system into taking it off the air," Francovich said. "In order to release it in theatrical situations, I had to let the option expire."

"It's in distribution in about 30 or 40 countries," Francovich said. "It's gotten consistently great reviews and large audiences."

During its first two weeks running in Washington, D.C., he added, "On Company Business" was the city's top-grossing film, thanks in part to a large number of CIA employees in the audiences.

Francovich, 41, is the son of an American mining engineer who worked more than 20 years in Latin America. Francovich said he grew up in almost every Latin American country "south of Honduras" and had a first-hand opportunity to see the degree of U.S. influence in those countries.

"On Company Business" grew out of a documentary Francovich made called "Chile in the Heart," a film about the last three years in the life of Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. Neruda died in 1973, around the time of the September coup that overthrew the elected government of Salvador Allende and installed the military junta led by General Augusto Pinochet.

"His funeral was one of the first acts of resistance against the Pinochet government," Francovich said. "And obviously, if you're making a film on Chile between the years of 1970 and '73, you're dealing with the whole issue of the United States' role there. I got in touch with some people who worked for the CIA to ask them questions about what the CIA had done in Chile. And 'On Company Business' came out of those conversations."

Given the generally negative and occasionally startling revelations presented in the film about the CIA, Francovich's access to top CIA offi-

cials is somewhat surprising. Among those interviewed were Colby and David Atlee Phillips, former Western Hemisphere division chief for the CIA. During the interviews with CIA officials and agents, Francovich said he found many of them were extremely sociable.

"They have to have a certain amount of social skills because a lot of the work they do is social," Francovich said. But he added that many of them also "have a great deal of arrogance."

"They're quite used to manipulating the press," Francovich said. "And I don't really think they were aware of the scope of this film, in other words the thoroughness of what we were going to do."

"In some cases, it's not so difficult to get an interview, to do an interview," Francovich said. "What's difficult is to prepare yourself, to have a sense of who they are, why they will talk to you, how what they say fits in, and what the main thrust of the interview should be."

"Some people were more difficult than others. Obviously, when you're interviewing William Colby, you're not going to get him to reveal any secrets. But what you do get is a portrait of this man and a portrait of his credibility, particularly as contrasted with someone else."

Francovich said he is interested in making available some of the film shot during the production of "On Company Business." He said he is trying to organize a group that will employ unused footage to make shorter films focusing on specific aspects of CIA operations. In addition, he said he would like to see shorter versions of the three-hour documentary made available to school and social groups.

"The whole purpose of making films is so people can see them and learn something from them," Francovich said. "If not, they're an awfully expensive way to aggrandize your ego."

Francovich is now working on a documentary about U.S.-Australian rela-

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